

FLOATING HISTORY

Kayaking the Lower Wabash River

By Stace England

I'd been thinking about a multi-day kayak trip down part of the Wabash River for years, but never seemed able to get it scheduled until September of 2003. A float from the historic community of Vincennes, in southwestern Indiana to the equally interesting town of New Harmony, Indiana seemed like a good trip for a variety of reasons – it would be fun, safe and revisit some very old family connections. My ancestors had come up the Wabash to settle in then Illinois territory near St. Francisville in 1817, and remnants of their arrival are still present in the names of area landmarks like England Levee Pond and the old England Slough.

Before my relatives and other Europeans “discovered” the area, Native American tribes had used the Wah-Bah Shik-Ki, (pronounced Ou-a-ba-che by the French, and later Wabash by the English) for centuries as a major water route. The famous Shawnee Chief Tecumseh and his party traveled the river to Vincennes in brightly colored war canoes for an initial, cordial meeting with Indiana territorial Governor William Henry Harrison in 1808. Things got sufficiently bloodier in 1811 when Tecumseh's half brother, Tensquatawa the Prophet, launched an ill-advised attack on Harrison's forces at Tippecanoe Creek, while Tecumseh was on a mission in the southeast uniting various tribes against white encroachment. The battle at Tippecanoe was essentially a draw but resulted in two significant things; a killer slogan for Harrison's successful Whig Party run for the Presidency in 1840 (Tippecanoe and Tyler Too) and greatly diminished Native American political power and presence in the region. Harrison died a month after his inauguration, marking the shortest presidential term in U.S. history.

Canoe/kayak purists don't fancy the Wabash as a scenic river, and after crossing it hundreds of times growing up in Lawrence County Illinois I pretty much shared that assessment. But I quickly

learned both the purists and me were dead wrong. In truth, the lower Wabash is a perfect body of water for the expert and novice paddler alike. Huge, sweeping and majestic in many sections, particularly south of Mt. Carmel, it's large enough to feel substantial and important, without the barge traffic and additional hazards of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. I met four boats on the entire seventy-three mile trip, so the Wabash also offers something more popular rivers can't - beautiful solitude.

Vincennes, founded in 1732 as a French fur trading post is where this regional history coalesces, and there's no better place to start any journey down the lower Wabash. The city is very accommodating to boaters. Randy Crismore, Vincennes Assistant Chief of Police and Alderman Dan Ravellette got back to me immediately with information on multi-day vehicle parking and good



wishes. Boat ramps are available at Kimmel Park or the Illinois side of Memorial Bridge, but from either starting point you'll want to spend some time at the George Rogers Clark Memorial. For the uninitiated the Memorial, completed in 1932, is a huge, astonishing structure to find in a small Indiana town, built with granite and marble to a

height of eighty feet. Tours are available and well worth it. Several days could be spent touring all Vincennes has to offer, including the nearby Old Cathedral (1826), the Old French House (1806), Grouseland, home of William Henry Harrison and other historic sites. Numerous lodging and camping options are available, and try Cutters Way on Second Street for food and drink.

Day one on the river was a short, thirteen and a half mile float from Vincennes to St. Francisville, Illinois. Clark and his army crossed the swollen Wabash near this point in the winter of

1779 on their epic eighteen-day march from Kaskaskia to Vincennes, capturing Ft. Sackville and marking the beginning of the end of British occupation and control of the western frontier.

St. Francisville is small community with provisions available but no lodging. Although there's no official campground paddlers are welcome to pitch their tents at sandstone bluffs near the boat landing area. Stop at Newlin's for conversation and supplies, and the Village Inn on the edge of town for dinner and drinks.

Just before reaching St. Francisville boaters cross under the old Wabash Cannonball railroad bridge, now a one-lane toll bridge for vehicle traffic. It looks like a third-world hunk of rusted metal but the locals insist it's completely safe for cars. Debate seems to exist about the weight limit – mainly



if there is one – but several people in town told me semi trucks regularly cross. I've ridden a bike over it several times and when asking the tollbooth operator about the fee, the response has always been the same; "if you're brave enough to ride a bike across, it's free." Cyclists will find some hazards;

splinters on railroad ties than can blow a tire, slick creosote in hot weather and oncoming cars, but you can dismount and place your bike near the side to let autos pass.

Day two was an extremely pleasant, twenty mile run from St. Francisville to Mt. Carmel, Illinois. No towns exist along the banks before Mt. Carmel but there are a couple of fishing camps including "Pulleyville" about four miles south of St. Francisville and another near tiny Patton, Illinois. Both are good for rest stops and conversation. Wildlife was abundant along this stretch including

beaver, dozens of great blue herons and hundreds of ducks. Hanging Rock, located at a bend about four miles north of Mt. Carmel, was the site of a Piankishaw Indian village. Around that bend is the Grand Rapids, once the site of a dam and hotel. The remaining dam section creates some fun, choppy waves and even a little white water.

Mt. Carmel has two landing spots, a boat dock at the end of Fifth Street just past the mouth of the White River and a second near the bridge to Indiana. There are several lodging options and I picked the grungy, but adequate Uptown Motel for it's central location. Try the King Chinese Buffet on Fourth Street if you're really hungry after a day of paddling, and The Rustic Pump on Fifth Street when you get thirsty. Bluff City Landing, one of the nicer bars on the main drag, Market Street, was gutted by fire a few months ago and the local rumor mill had lined up the usual suspects – insurance scam, meth lab or careless smoking. One solitary voice of reason at the Pump's bar said it was probably an electrical fire, unfortunately common in older buildings of the period.

Mt. Carmel was founded by three Methodist ministers from Ohio who established the community based on religious principles, platting the town and writing the first articles of association in 1818. When they saw the bluffs rising above the river they were reminded of the biblical Mt. Carmel where the prophet Elijah did battle with the prophets of Baal. The town was once a thriving



port, visited by many steamboats bringing goods for local merchants. The Wabash County Museum site was the home of one of those merchants, Samuel Shannon. Shannon's home was built around 1870 and his store was around the corner on Market Street.

At one time Mt. Carmel was probably

the picture perfect midwestern town, and is still a pleasant place, but increasing empty storefronts on Market Street speak to its current economic challenges. Residents were counting down the days to the closing of the Snap On Tool factory, a major, good paying employer for decades. You can still find huge, surprisingly well-kept older homes along Cherry Street, reminders of earlier prosperous times. The town takes its high school football damn seriously, complete with a local cable access channel football show, and the Aces play on one of the more unusual fields in the region. Seating is built on a massive hillside sloping down toward the field and the Wabash. It's worth a visit if you're in the area on a Friday night during football season.

Day three required an early start and was the longest by far, a thirty-mile run to Grayville, Illinois. Only seventeen miles by car, the Wabash teases in this stretch with two giant bends that jack up the mileage. But most of those miles are worth it, particularly the pass near Coffee Island and Coffee Creek, which mark the site of Beal Woods State Park, one of the only remaining virgin timber stands in the United States east of the Mississippi river. Beal Woods has excellent hiking trails and a new information and welcome center, but those would have to wait for a return trip by car. A bit farther down is the stone outcropping known as McCleary's Bluff, site of another Indian village and later a private residence. Giant sand bar beaches strewn with large mussel shells were common in the bends and great for rest stops.

Twenty mile an hour wind gusts made for tough going, particularly when the river bends took me right into the large waves and white caps they were producing. My strategy was to hug the Illinois bank and paddle like hell. At the top of the second bend north of Grayville something hit me hard on the right side of the face and neck. For a moment I thought I'd been jumped by someone from the bank, until I saw a huge carp bounce off the side of the kayak back into the river.

Several Asian carp species were imported in 1972 for use in Arkansas catfish farms to help clean their ponds. The flood of 1993 released them into the Mississippi, and they've been traveling through the river systems, spawning and growing larger ever since. An Asian carp's natural defense mechanism is to leap out of the water into the air, particularly when agitated by boat motors, and these fish are becoming a major menace to motorized river traffic. Later I met a research boat from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale Fisheries, catching large carp in a net along the bank. I began paddling over to say hello and one of the boat operators waved me off, shouting something like, "hey, these carp can jump out of the water and knock a man in the head."

Grayville was one of the early communities in White County, located at the mouth of Bonpas Creek, and settled by the Gray family around 1810. Bonpas is French for "good bay" and early French keel boatmen tied their boats at the mouth of Bonpas Creek in the spring to escape high water and floating ice.

In a cruel twist of navigational fate the Wabash, vital to Grayville's history and development, bypassed the town in the 1980's when flooding and erosion carved a new channel past the bend where the city is located. Boaters must now travel up a long "deadwater" oxbow lake to reach Grayville proper. The river's new path is more than a psychological blow; now river traffic often skips the community, taking fuel and food dollars with it. Local officials have tried to get the Army Corps of Engineers to dredge the old channel for years and an expensive feasibility study was done, but the town apparently lacks the national political clout to make it happen.

Grayville has many services including a well-maintained campground in town, and two motels

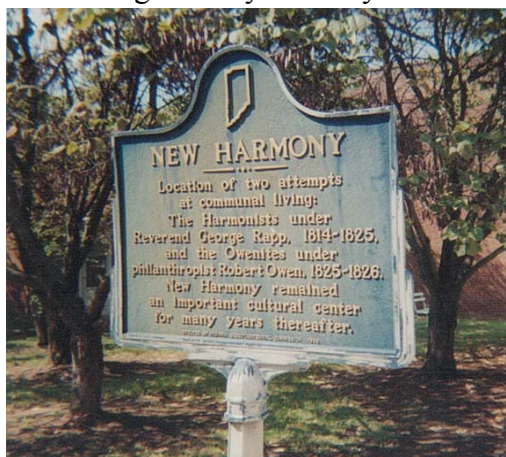


a mile south at Interstate 64. Boaters wanting a room can take out at the I-64 bridge, and walk one mile to the Super 8 or Best Western Windsor Oaks Inn, which has an off

track betting parlor. The Windsor Oaks has a restaurant, but if you can get into town, hit The Hard Times Fish Market located at the end of North Street. The Hard Times serves fish on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights from four to eight p.m. May through early October, and people travel from miles around to eat their buffet dinners.

Walking to the Windsor Oaks from the boat dock I met Chip Judge, who lives about half a mile from the river. Chip asked what I was traveling in, and where I'd left it. When I said my kayak was semi-hidden near the dock he said, "let's go get 'er and store it here, it may not be there in the morning." Chip was a great guy with a nice Ford truck and insisted I get in the cab with him, even though I was filthy from fighting the river all day. He's politely rescued many boaters over the years that have run out of gas or had mechanical problems, and if fate or the Good Lord put someone in that location for a reason, this was the right guy. Chip gave me a ride to the motel that afternoon and him and his son took me back to the river the next day. He was a gentlemen coon hunter who clearly loved his family and his dogs, in that order.

Grayvillians are in an understandable funk these days after new Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich stopped construction on a state prison project just south of town, citing budget concerns. Local officials said the town was into the project with about six million dollars of its own money for land acquisition and water treatment plant improvements. Hundreds of promised jobs are now lying out in weeds just off Illinois Route One, along with millions of dollars of concrete. Maybe it could be a giant skateboard park. As far as breaks go this town is due – Governor, throw the Grayville project in the budget next year and you'll have thousands of downstate votes in the next election.



Day four was a short run of eight and one half miles to New Harmony, Indiana, site of two utopian communities. The first, Harmonie on the Wabash, was founded in 1814 by the

Harmony Society, a group of separatists from the German Lutheran Church. Led by Johann Georg Rapp, they left Harmonie, Pennsylvania when prices in Indiana's lower Wabash Valley allowed them to buy a much larger tract of land. Celibacy did not help with community expansion or church membership, and in 1825 the Harmonists moved back to Pennsylvania. Robert Owen, a Welsh-born industrialist and social philosopher, bought New Harmony and surrounding land for his social experiment, which lasted only two years. World-renowned scientists and educators settled in New Harmony and Owen's group introduced vocation education, kindergarten and other educational reforms that have left a permanent mark on American society. Some of the original buildings from these two groups remain, and tours are available.

The town has excellent accommodations at the New Harmony Inn, with over ninety comfortable rooms in buildings constructed in a modern Harmonist style. Two of the best restaurants in the region are located there, including the famous Red Geranium and the newer Cooper House on Main Street. My personal preference is the Cooper House, but you'll have a memorable meal at either. Kunstfest, a large German heritage festival, was happening that weekend and lots of other food options were available on the street.

The New Harmony Inn staff was great about storing my kayak, and Greg Cox from maintenance picked me up in a golf cart to haul it back to a tool shed. We threw it on the cart roof, held on to the sides, and dodged Kunstfesters through the streets of New Harmony while Greg told me stories of shooting the dam just south of town, once busting up a new Grumman canoe in the process due to an inexperienced partner. "Next time I'll make that run," I promised him.

On day five I left the river for the seventy-two mile bike ride back to Vincennes. It felt great to use my legs after four days stuffed in the kayak. The ride was interesting and went fine until I reached Patoka, Indiana and found construction on Indiana Route 41 up to the bridge over the White River. A

few well-meaning locals steered me east into the countryside toward a safer route, and I promptly got lost. Fortunately I was rescued by Tim and Angela Bertram, out driving a truck with an ATV in the back. Tim gave me some directions, apparently saw the puzzled look on my face, then offered to take me on up to Hazelton. Once there they drove me safely across the river. I sat on their ATV wearing my bike helmet and gave the locals a show down Route 41.

After crossing White River the ride progressed through rolling Indiana farm country, and I had a better appreciation for the people that settled the region, and how they got there. The route brought me back into Vincennes past the giant Clark Memorial, gleaming in the afternoon sun - a shimmering end to a very memorable trip.

- *Stace England is a freelance writer and musician who lives in Cobden, Illinois.*



John, Stace and Jim England at St. Francisville Dock

**No outfitter services exist on this route, so paddlers will need to bring their own gear and make arrangements for transportation at their take out point. Visit the following links for more information:*

<http://www.vincennes.org/>

<http://www.mount-carmel.il.us/>

<http://www.cityofgrayville.com/>
<http://www.newharmony.org/>